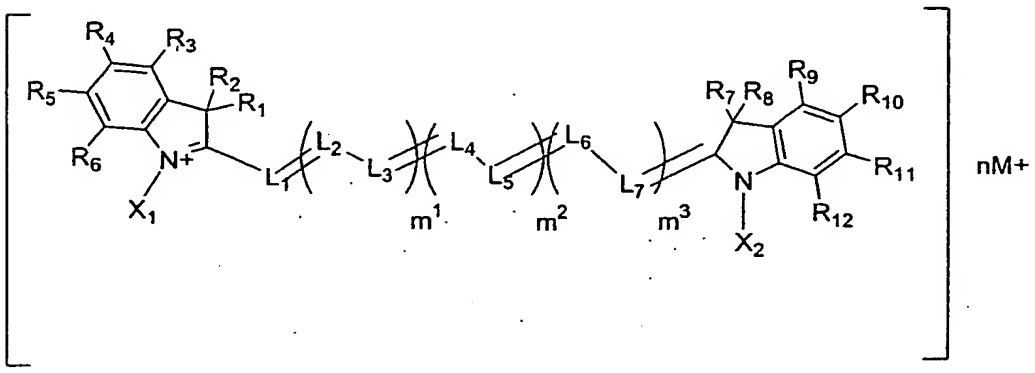
What is claimed is:

1. A near infrared fluorescent contrast agent comprising a compound represented by the following formula [I] or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof:

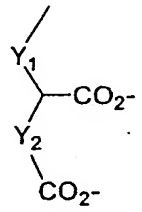


wherein R^1, R^2, R^7, and R^8 independently represent a substituted or unsubstituted C_1-C_{10} alkyl group or a substituted or unsubstituted aryl group, and R^1 and R^2 and/or R^7 and R^8 may bind to each other to form a ring; R^3, R^4, R^5, R^6, R^9, R^{10}, R^{11}, and R^{12} independently represent a hydrogen atom, a substituted or unsubstituted C_1-C_6 alkyl group, a substituted or unsubstituted aryl group, a substituted or unsubstituted heteroaryl group, a halogen atom, cyano group, carboxyl group, or sulfo group, and R^3, R^4, R^5, R^6, R^9, R^{10}, R^{11}, and R^{12} may bind to each other to form a ring; X^1 and X^2 independently represent a substituted or unsubstituted C_1-C_{15} alkyl group or a substituted or unsubstituted aryl group and X^1 and X^2 in total have 0 to 4 carboxyl groups, provided that when the number of the carboxyl group is 0 or 1, each of X^1 and X^2 is a C_1 -C_5 carboxyalkyl group or a sulfoalkyl group and at least one of R^3, R^4, R^5, R^6, R^9, R^{10}, R^{11}, and R^{12} represents a substituted or unsubstituted aryl group or a substituted or unsubstituted heteroaryl group; m^1 represents 0 or 1; m^2 represents 0 or 1; m^3 represents 0 or 1; L^1, L^2, L^3, L^4, L^5, L^6, and L^7 independently represent a substituted or unsubstituted methine group, provided that when two or more of the

methine groups have substituents, the substituent may bind to each other to form a ring, provided that when each of X^1 and X^2 has one carboxyl group, each of X^1 and X^2 is carboxyl group-substituted hydrocarbon group and at least one of the methine groups represented by L^1, L^2, L^3, L^4, L^5, L^6, and L^7 is a substituted methine group and R^4 and R^{10} represent a sulfo group; M represents a hydrogen atom, a metal, or a quaternary ammonium salt; and n represents an integer of 1 to 7 necessary for neutralizing charge.

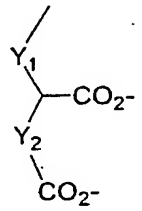
2. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to claim 1, wherein each of m^1, m^2, and m^3 is 1.

3. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to claim 1 or 2, wherein X^1 is a group represented by the following formula (i):



wherein Y^1 and Y^2 independently represent a substituted or unsubstituted divalent linking group.

4. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to claim 1 or 2, wherein X^1 and X^2 independently represent a group represented by the following formula (i):

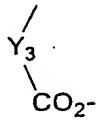


wherein Y^1 and Y^2 independently represent a substituted or unsubstituted a divalent bond.

5. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein at least one of R^3, R^4, R^5, R^6, R^9, R^{10}, R^{11}, and R^{12} is a substituted or unsubstituted aryl group or a substituted or unsubstituted heteroaryl group.

6. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to claim 1 or 2, wherein at least one of R^4, R^5, R^{10}, and R^{11} is a substituted or unsubstituted aryl group or a substituted or unsubstituted heteroaryl group; and each of X^1 and X^2 is independently a C_1-C_5 carboxyalkyl group or a sulfoalkyl group.

7. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to claim 1 or 2, wherein X^1 and X^2 independently represent a group represented by the following formula:



wherein Y^3 represents a C_1-C_{10} hydrocarbon group and at least one of the methine groups represented by L^1, L^2, L^3, L^4, L^5, L^6, and L^7 is a substituted methine group and each of R^4 and R^{10} is a sulfo group.

8. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to any one of claims 3 or 4 wherein Y_1 represents $-(CH_2)_pCONH-$ wherein p represents an integer of 1 to 4 and Y_2 represents $-(CH_2)-$ or $(CH_2)_2-$.

9. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to any of claims 1 to 8, which is used for tumor imaging.

10. The near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to any of claims 1 to 8, which is used for angiography.

11. A method of fluorescence imaging which comprises the steps of introducing the near infrared fluorescent contrast agent according to any of claims 1 to 8 into a living body, exposing said body to an excitation light, and detecting near infrared fluorescence from the contrast agent.